Questions and Answers

By Thich Nhat Hanh

Dear Sangha, today is the 27th of July, 1998, and we are in the New Hamlet for our question and answer period. I would like to take one question directly from the Sangha.

The question is about the first of the Five Contemplations that we say before we eat: can we say that the food is not the gift of the sky and the earth, but the fruit of interdependence between different elements?

I think that we can, but it is nice to feel grateful. When we enjoy eating an orange, we might feel grateful to the orange tree, which has spent a lot of time making a beautiful orange for us. So by thinking of giving and receiving, we can establish a deeper sense of relationship to the orange tree. We know that the orange tree also receives a lot of things from the clouds, the sunshine and the earth. In fact, everything that is has to rely on everything else in order to be and to grow. That is why I not only feel grateful for the orange tree, but I am also grateful for the clouds, the sunshine, the earth, and so on. We like the idea of being thankful to the cosmos, to everything that offers itself to us as food. That is why in Plum Village we organize a Thanksgiving Day, and we address our thanks to four objects: first of all to our father and our mother, who gave us life; to our teacher who gave us spiritual life and helped us know how to live in the here and now; we thank our friends who support us, especially in difficult moments, and we thank every being in the animal, vegetable and mineral world for our support and maintenance. So the Buddhists also celebrate Thanksgiving, with that kind of insight. And while we celebrate Thanksgiving, we relate to everyone who is there, and this is a very good practice so that we don't cut ourselves off from reality. The feeling of gratitude can help us to remember and to cultivate the element of compassion and loving kindness in us.

(Thay reads) *Dear Thay, I wish to know why there are no bicycles, and fewer cars, here in Plum Village.*

I also ask myself that question. In the first three years of Plum Village, there were a number of bicycle accidents. Many young people were injured and had to be taken to the hospital. In the beginning there was a lot of enthusiasm about bicycles, and I wanted each monk and each nun to have a bicycle of their own, but my dream has never been realized. So please help. Another question from the Sangha, please.

This is a little bit personal to the Vietnamese community, especially in the United States, because I am from California. From my small experiences with many other Vietnamese people, we suffer greatly from alienation within our families, within the community because we are immigrants, between old and new, young and old. Many of my brothers and sisters in America also have a lack of roots-- we are like ghosts, you can say. So I was wondering if you could give me some advice to bring back to America.

The immigrants have to make a lot of efforts to be integrated into the new society to which they have come. The first difficulty is the generation gap between parents and children. The parents were born in Vietnam, and the children may have been born in Vietnam, but they have left Vietnam at an early age, or they were born in the West. Many of them cannot communicate in their mother tongue, and parents are often very busy trying to make a living, so they do not have enough time to take care of their children, and to try to transmit to them the cultural values they have received from their ancestors. When they send the children into western society, to school, they don't have the time to follow, to support, to understand, and the way of thinking, speaking, and acting of the young people becomes very different from their parents. Sometimes it is very difficult for them to accept that. With the generation gap, there is a cultural gap, and if parents and children do not have time together to talk about that and to find a way to bridge the gap, then

the difficulties will always increase.

I think the young people from immigrant families have to make an effort to be well versed in both cultures. They have to have a double culture—they have to learn the best things in the country where they live, but they also have to spend time to learn the best things in their root culture. If they possess that kind of double culture, they can swim like a fish, whether in the Western culture or in the Asian culture. If their parents are too busy to help them, they should come together and support each other in doing so. I think that in every culture there are positive things and negative things, and it is very easy to learn the negative things. For the jewels of that culture, you have to spend time, energy and a lot of patience in order to learn, and you need protection. This protection might come from a spiritual community, it can come from parents, or it can come from a group of people who are aware of the problem. That group might be made up of young people like you, who come together to discuss their real problems, instead of spending a lot of time in amusements. You might invite those who have insight, and who have experience in this matter, to shed light and give you advice on how you can grow up having a double culture. If you can rely on your Sangha, meaning your community, to go in that direction, one day you will be able to go home and help your own parents.

Your parents also have their own difficulties, and in order to lessen their difficulties it is very important to learn the practice that I proposed the other day: to learn the art of deep listening, and to learn the art of using calm and loving speech. By speaking with calm, and compassion, by listening deeply to the other person, you will be able to restore communication between yourself and your parents. It is only when both sides can talk to each other that issues can be resolved, and there will be collaboration between the two generations in order to lessen the difficulties, and to support each other.

(Bell)

Society's definition of sexuality has always confused me. I feel much more at home with the more restricted and sacred role of sexuality within the Buddhist tradition. There is a question that still lingers in my mind: what is the essence and importance of sexuality?

Last week in a Dharma talk I discussed what we call "empty sex." "Empty sex" means sex without love, without commitment, without communion or mutual understanding between the two parties. In our modern society sometimes very young people, twelve or thirteen, fourteen years old are already having sex. It seems to me that this is very dangerous, because that sex may be described as "empty sex." Once empty sex has been experienced, the chance of having deep communication, deep engagement, will be rare. I don't know how to solve this problem, but we have to come together in order to discuss this.

There is a tendency to believe that the feeling of loneliness in you can only be dissolved when you come together very close in a sexual relationship. I have even heard one person say that the best way to know a person is to have sex with him or her. When there is no sharing about deepest concerns, when there is no real communication, no mutual understanding of each other, and no serious commitment, I believe that sex is something very destructive. Because first of all you see that the coming together of two bodies cannot resolve that feeling of loneliness within yourself. Worse than that, it can create a gap between you and the other person, and your loneliness will be deeper; you will be frustrated, because in the beginning you thought that the coming together of two bodies will help you feel less lonely. But you'll find our very soon that that is not the way to remove the feeling of loneliness. Communication, mutual understanding, harmony, especially sharing the same ideals of life that can only be achieved by the practice of deep looking, deep listening. I would advise that if that kind of mutual understanding, that kind of intimate relationship between the two souls has not been achieved, then the coming together of the two bodies should not take place.

The sexual act can be very sacred, very beautiful, and also very spiritual, if it goes together with deep understanding, deep aspiration. We know that sexuality is also to assure the continuation of our species, and the sexual energy in each person is just the natural tendency of the species. There are many people who get in trouble, because the sexual energy in them is too overwhelming, too strong. It is a kind of energy that you should know how to manage, to take care of, otherwise it will not let you be peaceful, it will push you to do and to say things that can cause a lot of damage. Many families have been destroyed, many children have been abused and will have to suffer all their lives, because people do not know how to handle their sexual energy.

As a Buddhist monk, I was taught that you need energy in order to study the Dharma, you need energy in order to practice sitting, contemplation, and so on. So, as a monk, you should know how to channel the amount of energy that you have into the direction of the studies and the practice. If you don't know how to channel it in that direction, it will go in the other direction, and you might be in trouble if you don't know how to manage and take care of your sexual energy. The Buddha advised the monks and the nuns not to eat in the evening, or to eat very little in the evening. That is partly because if you eat well at noon, if you chew the food very carefully, then you'll get enough nutrition. If you overeat, you'll have more energy than you need. In Plum Village our monks and nuns also practice working, using their physical strength, and also practice jogging and things like that. We learn how to take care of our bodies and our energy.

In Plum Village there is no television. The television set in Plum Village is only used for listening to Dharma talks. The TV sets here also practice. They only receive videotapes of Dharma talks; they don't receive other kinds of programs. They practice like the bell of mindfulness. They emit only the Dharma--they never diffuse the anti-Dharma stuff. In Plum Village you don't consume magazines and films and books that can arouse and water the seed of craving within yourself. You don't even sing love songs, that kind of love that brings you down. In Plum Village we sing a lot, but our songs always reflect the joy of the practice of the Dharma. In the practice centers this is very important also. We create an environment where everyone knows how to make the best of their energy. We are aware that people around us suffer a lot, and that is why we manage our time and energy, to use it in order to respond to the suffering around us. By doing so, we cultivate the energy of compassion within. Plum Village has programs to help hungry children, refugees, and people in many countries. Monks and nuns and others in Plum Village participate in that work; they get in touch with the suffering that is going on, and they also use their energy and time in helping people. Of course, they go around and organize days of mindfulness and mindfulness retreats, and that is also a way of helping. We try our best to use our energy, our time, and our resources, to alleviate the suffering inside us and around us.

I think the question concerning sexuality here is how to manage, how to take care of the sources of energy in us. In the beginning the kind of energy that we had was non-differentiated, but very soon that energy is channeled in many directions. If you know how to channel it in the direction of the practice, of learning, of helping the people who suffer around you, then you'll be alright, you'll have enough peace. But if you don't do that, sexual energy will be the main source of energy in you, you will have no peace, and you may cause suffering to yourself and suffering around you. That is why the Third Mindfulness Training, and the Fifth Mindfulness Training are linked to each other. Consumption and protecting the integrity of couples and children are linked together. If you don't know how to consume, then you don't know how to practice the kind of protection, which relates to the Third Mindfulness Training.

What do you do when you're angry?

That is a good question. When I am angry, I go back to my breathing. I breathe in, and breathe out mindfully. I know that anger is in me, that I should not say anything at that time. I should not do anything, because I know that doing or saying anything when I am angry is very dangerous. I refrain from acting and speaking because I could cause a lot of damage in me and in the other person. I think your question is the same as this one (Thay reads a written question):

Dear Thay, sometimes I feel hurt by words or actions, and I get angry. In your books you say often that to remove your anger is dangerous. (Did I say so?—laughter.) *I know for myself that if I don't speak about my difficulties, and if I just suppress my anger, I will suffer and my anger will come out in another way, and I risk exploding, or I get sick. In relation to the Peace Treaty, you say that we can express our anger only after we have taken good care of our anger. How is it possible to cultivate love and compassion and not to suppress our anger? In which way can we talk about our hurts? Is there a non-destructive way to express our anger?*

I would like to invite you to read that chapter on the Peace Treaty again. I don't think that in order to cultivate love and compassion you have to suppress your anger. I don't believe so. I don't think that we have to suppress our anger at all. I believe that we have to recognize our anger, to allow it to be, not to suppress it, and to learn how to embrace it. Embracing is not suppressing—embracing is taking good care of it. When your baby cries, you never want to suppress your baby. Your baby cries because your baby suffers. What you should do is to pick up your baby and hold it very dearly in your arms. That is exactly what I recommend to do when anger is there. Anger is like our baby, and we

should not suppress it. We have to say, "My dear little anger, I know you are there. I will take good care of you. I am here for you." I do that with mindful breathing: "Breathing in, I know that anger is in me; breathing out, my anger, I will take good care of myself."

Anger is one block of energy in me, but the practice is for me to invite another kind of energy to come up, so that I can embrace my anger tenderly. The first energy is negative, the second energy is positive. The first energy is anger, and the second kind of energy is mindfulness: mindfulness of breathing and mindfulness of anger, embracing your anger with mindfulness. So you allow your anger to be, you recognize it as existing in you, you don't want to fight it. You recognize it. It has the right to be there. The baby has the right to cry. But you should not let your anger overwhelm you or be alone in you. That way you will suffer a lot, and you may do things that will cause a lot of damage. You may say things that will damage the relationship between you and the other person. That is why the wisest way is to recognize it, to allow it to be, and to embrace it tenderly: "Oh, my dear anger, I am here for you. I will take care of you, what is wrong?" You look deeply into it, you are attending to your anger, and you are not suppressing it.

In psychotherapy, people advise us to touch our anger, to allow our anger to be, to recognize our anger. But the question is, who will take care of the anger, who will recognize the anger, who will allow the anger to be? What is the agent that does the work of taking care, of recognizing? In the teaching of the Buddha it is very clear—the agent that is taking care of anger, recognizing and embracing anger is a kind of energy we call the energy of mindfulness. When you are angry, you have to practice mindfulness of anger. Mindfulness of anger means to be aware that anger is in you as an energy, and to recognize it, to allow it to be. You embrace it tenderly with the energy of mindfulness. The best way to do that is with mindful breathing, or mindful walking. Usually when we get angry we don't do that. We pay more attention to the person whom we think is the cause of our anger. But the Buddha advises us to go back and take good care of your anger. When your house is on fire, the most important thing for you to do is to go back to your house and try to put out the fire. The most important thing is not to run after the person that you believe to be the arsonist. That is what the Buddha recommended to us—to go home to ourselves and to take care of the fire inside. That is why during the time of practice--of going back, recognizing it, allowing to be, embracing it, looking deeply--if you do that, then you will not have the time to say or do anything. The Buddha recommended that we not say or do anything when we are angry, because that is dangerous. Go back and take care.

We have to be aware that our anger may be born from a wrong perception on our part. That happens often. The other person may not wish to make us suffer, to destroy us, or to punish us, but because we are not very attentive, we misunderstood him or her. That wrong perception is why we get angry at him or her, and we blame him or her as the cause of our suffering. That is something that can happen very often. That may be the first thing you discover when you look deeply into the nature of your anger. The second thing you may discover is that your seed of anger, the root of anger within you, is too strong. If a second person were listening to that sentence or seeing that act, he or she would not be as angry as you are, because the seed of anger in him or her is very small. You have a big seed of anger--which is why you get angry so easily. There fore the main cause of your anger is not that person. The main cause of your anger and your misery is that the seed of anger is too strong in you. We have to recognize that in many people the seed of anger is small, but in other people the seed of anger is very big. The seed of anger in you may be the main cause, and the other person may be just a secondary cause.

If you continue to practice walking meditation, and mindful breathing and looking into your anger, your situation, you might find out other things. Other kinds of insight can come, such as your realization that the other person who has done that or said that to you, suffers a lot, and does not know how to handle his suffering. That is why he is spilling over his suffering to the people around. Anyone who happened to be in his environment would have to suffer, because that is a person who does not know how to handle his suffering, how to transform his suffering. That is why, while making himself suffer, he makes many people around him suffer also. You have learned the Dharma, you know how to practice mindful walking, to embrace your anger, you now feel much better already, but he is still in hell. So while practicing walking meditation you might recognize that, and be motivated by the desire to go back in order to help him or her, because he or she is still in hell. When you feel that you have to go back to help him, it means that your anger has been transformed into compassion. Thanks to your practice of looking deeply, of mindful walking, of mindful breathing. The other person may be your husband, your wife, your daughter, your father, your mother…if you don't help him, if you don't help her, who will? So, if you are motivated by the desire to go home and help him out, it means that your practice has borne fruit, and you should be joyful, because you have been successful in the practice.

About twelve years ago there was a young man who came to Plum Village and practiced. He was only twelve or thirteen years old. He came with his younger sister. That young man did not like his father at all, because every time he hurt himself while playing, instead of helping him, his father would shout at him: "You're stupid! How could you do such a thing?" and he told me, "To be a father, you have to be kind. When your child is suffering, you have to come to him and help him, and not shout at him and insult him like that. So I have decided that when I grow up to be a father, I will never do as he does. I will do the opposite." He was very sincere. One day his sister was playing in the Lower Hamlet, sitting in a hammock with another girl, and both of them fell out. His sister hit a large rock, and got hurt, with blood running from her forehead. The young man was there, and when he saw his sister like that, he suddenly became very angry. He was about to shout, "You stupid! Why did you do a thing like that?" But because he had been practicing in Plum Village every summer, he refrained from saying that, and when he saw someone taking care of his sister he walked away and practiced breathing and walking meditation. And during that walking meditation he found out very wonderful things. he

He could see that kind of anger in his father, but he also has that anger in him. If he does not practice, when he grows up to be a father, he will behave exactly like his father. That kind of seed of anger may have been transmitted to him by his father. That is what we call *Samsara*. He continued to practice walking alone. He found out that if he did not practice, he would not be able to transform that habit energy in himself, and he would behave exactly like his father. After some time he saw that his father may have also been the victim of a transmission: maybe the seed of anger in his father had been transmitted to him by his grandfather. For the first time understanding and compassion were born in that young man: "Oh, it may be that he is a victim of transmission, like me, and because he has not had a chance to practice he has transmitted that seed to me, and now if I don't practice I will transmit it to my children." At the moment that he saw that his father could be the object of transmission, a victim like him, his anger vis-à-vis his father suddenly dissolved, and he was motivated by the desire to go home to Switzerland and tell his father of what had happened, and invite his father to practice with him, in order to transform the habit energy in both father and son. I think that for a thirteen-year-old young man, that is a remarkable achievement of meditation.

Psychotherapists advise us to practice what they call "ventilation." Anger is a kind of smoke, a kind of energy in you, and you want to ventilate it so that the energy of anger will leave. "Get it out of your system," they advise us. So many psychotherapists advise this type of practice: you to go to your room, be sure that no one is in the room, lock the door, take a pillow, and use all your might to pound on the pillow, imagining the pillow as the object of your anger. If you continue to pound on the pillow with all of your might, then half an hour later they say you will get relief. In fact, you do get relief, because you are exhausted—you have no energy left to be angry. But the root of anger in you is still the same, if not stronger, because in the half hour of pounding the pillow you are making it grow bigger and bigger. To do that is not taking it out of your system, it is rehearsing your anger. If you are hungry and you go out to the refrigerator and get something to eat, and drink milk, and one hour later you will seem to be okay. But if someone comes and waters the seed of anger in you, you will get angry. You may get angrier than you did before. So the practice is quite dangerous; it is not taking the anger out of your system. During the time you practice pounding the pillow, you make the seed of anger in you grow. That is why it's dangerous. We are advised to get in touch with our anger. That's good—it's good to be aware of our anger, to embrace our anger. But in this case you are not really in touch with your anger, you are allowing yourself to be overwhelmed by your anger. You are not even in touch with the pillow, because if you were really in touch with the pillow, you would know that it's only a pillow, and if you know it's a pillow, you would not have the nerve to pound into it like that.

It's very important to learn how to embrace our anger, and practice looking deeply in order to find the roots of our anger. The Peace Treaty is very important. Many couples who come to Plum Village, husband and wife, father and son, mother and daughter, have studied the Peace Treaty. I don't have the time to go into a lot of details on the Peace Treaty, but many of them have signed the Peace Treaty after having studied it, and signed it in the presence of the whole Sangha, and they have done wonderfully because the Peace Treaty has helped them to protect themselves and deal with anger in a very intelligent way. And their happiness and harmony have always increased with the practice of the Peace Treaty. We have gotten many reports. Young couples who get married in Plum Village always advised to practice Flower Watering, Insight Offering, and the Peace Treaty. Any time there is anger, the Peace Treaty should be put into practice.

One item in the Peace Treaty says that when you get angry, you go back to your mindful breathing, you don't say anything yet, you don't do anything yet, and after that, when you feel that you are calm, you will go and tell him or her that you are angry and you want him or her to know it. You tell him or her that on Friday night you would like to practice looking deeply with him or her on the matter of your anger. If you are not calm yet, you have to write it down on a piece of paper: "Darling, I am angry. I am suffering very much, and I want you to know it. Let us practice looking deeply together, each of us in our own way, and this Friday night we'll have a chance to look deeply together." After having told him or her, or after having written that peace note to him or her, you'll feel much better already. And from now until Friday night both of you will know that you have to meet; therefore, from now until then, you have time to practice looking deeply. If before Friday night you have an insight, you have to telephone or fax her right away, so she can have relief as soon as possible.

Long answer! (*Laughter*.)

My question is also about anger. What can we do when we're with somebody who is angry with us? For example, I have a very close friend, and sometimes she's very angry and I'm aware that she's angry. I think that sometimes it's not related to something that I'm doing, or it's related to something that I don't know about. When she's angry I feel terrible, and I want to go away and think a lot of negative things. So my question is what can we do for a person when they are very angry, and also, how can we protect ourselves? Also with that person, my parents sometimes say very negative things that make me feel bad.

When you are in deep relationship with someone you have to try to understand him or her deeply. Deep understanding of that person helps you to behave in a way that will relieve that person from his or her suffering, and also can bring joy and happiness to him or her. So you have to be concerned. You have to try looking deeply at that person, with his or her help. The suffering that she has within herself is your problem also, because if you don't help her transform that suffering in her, not only will she continue to suffer, but you will also continue to suffer. So find a time when both of you are joyful, and sit down and really take a look at it: "My dear friend, you have suffering within yourself. The anger in you makes you suffer, and of course I cannot be happy when I see you suffer like that. Therefore, let us practice looking deeply into the roots of that anger." You do as a therapist would, trying to listen very carefully, with a lot of patience, listen without judgment, without condemnation, without criticizing, and both of you may come to a deep understanding of that suffering, how it has come to be. The Buddha said that when you already see the real cause of the suffering, you are in a position to see the way out. There must be some way of living, of practicing, of dealing with it, for that block of anger not to grow, and to be dissolved little by little. What kind of daily practice can she do on her own? What kind of daily practice can you do together with her, as a couple of friends? What kind of community, of Sangha, can you be affiliated with in order to strengthen your practice? What kind of books on the Dharma, what kind of Dharma talks, what kind of teacher do you need in order to strengthen your practice? These are all related questions that can help you, and help the person you love.

Cher Thay, pourriez-vous nous parler de celui qui fait votre maitre spirituel dans la tradition Bouddhique? (Thay, would you tell us about your teacher in the Buddhist tradition?)

My teacher was a very kind person. During the whole relationship he never shouted at me. He was a very gentle person. He was the youngest student of his teacher. In fact, when his teacher passed away, he was still not ordained by him, so his big brothers in the Dharma, just a few hours after the passing away of his teacher, organized an ordination ceremony in order for him to become a novice monk. That is why my teacher bore the name, "The last who bears the name of Thanh." Thanh means purity. All of his big brothers in the Dharma had a Dharma name beginning with the word "Thanh." So he was the last disciple with the Dharma name beginning with the word Thanh.

I became a novice monk at the age of sixteen, and he gave me a Dharma name that I did not like very much, because of my ignorance. My Dharma name is Phung Xuan that is "going to meet spring." I thought that that name was a little bit more appropriate for girls, not for boys. But finally I found out that his intention was that the practice should bring the spring, and not the winter, meaning that loving kindness and compassion have the power of reviving the things that are dying: when spring comes everything will be revived. The practice should be refreshing, and able to bring rebirth to society.

I would like to tell you a story concerning my teacher. I was his attendant for three months. One day I was bringing him lunch, and I forgot to put a pair of chopsticks on his tray. As you know, if you don't put a pair of chopsticks with a Vietnamese meal, it is difficult to eat. I was still a naïve novice. You are supposed to stand behind your teacher about two meters, ready to do anything for him, in case he needs anything. I thought that standing there doing nothing was a waste of time, so I was holding a sutra, and I tried to make use of the time by learning the sutra. I did not know that my teacher was eating without chopsticks. He was using his spoon to eat his rice, and so on. Finally, he finished, and he called me: "Dear novice." I said, "Yes." He asked me if there were still bamboo trees in the garden. I said, "Yes, there are a lot of bamboo trees in the garden." He said, "In that case, after having lunch, go and cut one bamboo tree." I said, "Yes, I will do that, my teacher." But one minute later I asked myself, "What is the use of cutting a bamboo tree?" So I asked, "Dear Teacher, what is the use of cutting a bamboo tree?" and he said, "In order to make some chopsticks. Don't you see, novice, there are no chopsticks on my tray." I was very scared. A big mistake; it was my poor practice of mindfulness. So I never forgot them again.

There was another time when he asked me to do something for him, and I was very eager to go and do it for him right away, so I did not close the door behind me mindfully. He called me back gently, and said, "Novice, this time you go out and close the door better than that." I knew that mindfulness practice is the basic practice, so I was very mindful this time; I made each step mindfully, I turned the knob mindfully, I opened the door mindfully, I stepped out mindfully, and I closed the door mindfully. And he did not need to teach me a second time. From that time on I knew how to close a door.

I have to tell you this also because it has to do with closing the door. One day in 1966 I visited the Trappist monk Thomas Merton in his monastery in Kentucky, and we spent two days and one night together. After that he gave a talk to the monks in Gethsemani, and he said something like, "When you see Thich Nhat Hanh closing a door, you know that he is a real monk." A few years ago a lady from Germany came here to Plum Village and practiced during the winter. She stayed with us for three weeks. On the day of her departure, after a formal lunch, she was asked to express some feelings about her stay. She said that the reason she had come to Plum Village was because she had read something by Thomas Merton about my way of closing the door, and she wanted to come just to see how I closed the door. She was staying in the New Hamlet, and no one among us was aware that she was observing us closing our doors, until the moment when she revealed the secret. She said that she had been very happy being with us for three weeks, that she had come only with the intention of seeing how we closed the door behind us. You know, all of this comes from my teacher. If you look at me, and you look at monks and nuns who are my students, you can see my teacher somehow—he's still there around us.

(Bell)

I work as a psychotherapist with women who were abused, and we use the practice that they are allowed to scream their anger and their sadness out, but we also do it in such a way that we embrace them while doing it. The first time I worked there and asked them to breathe deep, they just freaked out, because they stopped breathing not to feel their bodies anymore, not to feel the sadness. I also think it's necessary not to do it all the time, because it (the anger) is growing, but I didn't have the feeling that the anger was growing when they were allowed to do it with somebody is feeling it with them. I think it's necessary that they are asked to try to transform it, but I think that this is the next step. I have the feeling that before this step they must be allowed to show it, because they have no feeling anymore in their bodies. If they are allowed to show the blocked feelings in their bodies…they connect with their bodies again. This was my experience, and I wanted to share this with you, because I also think it's necessary to transform our anger, but I think when they have so much sadness in their bodies, it's not so easy just to embrace it.

I know that sometimes it's very difficult to embrace your anger, and there are those who cannot embrace their anger. That does not mean that it is impossible to embrace your anger. If you don't practice mindfulness, what kind of energy do you have in order to embrace your anger? Most of your clients do not practice mindfulness of breathing, mindfulness of walking, mindfulness of eating. That they cannot embrace their anger easily is very normal. I think the therapist should set an example: the therapist should show that when you have the energy of mindfulness, you can embrace your anger very well. It is very important to know that in many of us the blocks of pain are too important--pain, despair, anxiety and fear—and we do not have the courage to go back to ourselves, because we are afraid of

touching the blocks of suffering within us. Our daily practice is to try to run away from ourselves: we turn on the television, we pick up a novel to read, we take a car to go out, we engage in any kind of conversation, trying to escape ourselves.

For a person like that, to go back and embrace her anger is quite impossible. She has nothing with which to go back. If she goes back, she'll find herself overwhelmed by the amount of pain and anger and sorrow within her. In order to go back you need to be equipped with something, and that something is exactly the energy of mindfulness recommended by the Buddha. If you have that energy of mindfulness, you can go home and embrace your fear, your anger, and your despair. When you find yourself in a community of practitioners, you see that everyone is practicing that, and therefore you can allow yourself to practice the same way. In a practice center, we learn first of all to touch the positive elements in order to get nourishment.

The positive elements exist inside of us also—pain and suffering is just one side of it. The other side still possesses positive things. So the therapist, or the Dharma brother, can help you to identify the things that are not wrong in yourself. You may have the idea that everything in you goes wrong. But that is not true—there are things in you that have not gone wrong yet. There are things around us that have not gone wrong yet. The first practice is to rely on the Sangha, on brothers and sisters in the community, in order to be able to touch the positive elements within and around, for your nourishment. When you get a little bit stronger, you can re-establish the balance; by practicing getting in touch with the positive aspect, you continue to cultivate the energy of mindfulness in yourself, and you will be able to go home to yourself and embrace whatever is painful within you. Sometimes you can profit from the energy of mindfulness of other people. If your mindfulness is not strong enough for you to hold that pain within yourself, then a few brothers and sisters who sit with you and lend their power of mindfulness will help you to do so: "Courage, my brother, courage, my sister, we are here and we support you and going back to your pain to embrace it." I think that is to make use of the collective energy of the group, so your mindfulness energy will be strong enough to embrace the energy within you.

I think the insight is the same, but the practice should be realistic and intelligent. It is possible for many of us to go home to ourselves and embrace our pain, because we have practiced mindfulness. The seed of mindfulness in us has become strong enough, so that every time we begin to practice mindful breathing and mindful walking, we have enough energy to do it. And once you have done it, then you will not be afraid any more. If it happens once that you have come home, and if you can hold your pain tenderly, breathing in and breathing out, then the next time you will not be afraid. You will have confidence that you can go home to yourself, and you can do it the second time and the third time. But in the beginning, if you don't know whether you are strong enough to do it alone, then always ask a sister or a brother who is good in the practice to sit there with you to support you. It is like your child—if you tell her to practice breathing in and breathing out, to be aware of the rising and falling of her stomach, she may not be able to do it alone. But you can hold her hand, and say, "Darling, do this with Mommy: let us breathe in and become aware of the rising, and breathing out, be aware of the falling…" You will be a tremendous source of support to her, and she can do it, even if she is still a child. That is why the support of someone else in the community is very important.

My question is about guilt feelings. If you have someone who has so carefully watered his guilt seeds that they have become a huge tree, how would you advise this person who even feels guilty about feeling guilt?

In Buddhist psychology, the recognition that you have done something wrong, and feeling sorry for it, may be a good, positive energy. It is one of the mental formations identified as "indeterminate," because it may be good, or it may be bad. But if that feeling becomes a kind of prison, a complex of guilt, not allowing you to do anything, if you are caught by it, then it becomes something negative. With the awareness that you have done something wrong, that doing something wrong has caused suffering within you, and to people around you, and if you are motivated by the desire not to do it anymore, not to repeat it anymore, then you can achieve a transformation. You commit yourself not to do it, and not only not to do it, but to do the opposite. Then you can get the transformation and healing that you wish.

During the war in Vietnam, an American soldier got very angry because many of his people had died in an ambush organized by guerrillas. Because of that anger he tried to take revenge by creating an ambush of his own. So he came to the village where the ambush had happened, and he left a bag of sandwiches at the entrance of the village, and hid behind the trees and observed. He had put explosives into the sandwiches. They were very good sandwiches, but he

opened every sandwich and put explosives into it. He really did not know what he was doing, being carried away completely by his anger and his wish to take revenge. A group of children passed by and found the sandwiches, and they shared the sandwiches with each other. Five minutes after eating, they began to hold their stomachs and they cried and cried, and the parents came. This was a remote village. The parents tried to find a car to transport the children to the nearest hospital, which was several dozen kilometers away. The soldier knew perfectly well that there was no way to rescue them. Five children died because of his so-called ambush.

He could not tell anyone that story of what he had experienced in Vietnam. For more than ten years he was not at peace with himself. Every time he found himself sitting in a room with children, he could not bear it, and he had to run out of the room. This continued until the day that he came to a retreat organized by Plum Village in southern California. That retreat was organized especially for Vietnam veterans. Their psychotherapists and their families also came to support their practice. They organized into small groups of five or six people, and we asked many Vietnamese people living in surrounding communities to come and support us. We practiced sitting very still, and listening very deeply, and gave them a chance to speak out. There were people who sat there for half an hour, forty-five minutes, even more than an hour, without being able to say anything. There was a veteran who joined the walking meditation, but who did not want to mix with us, because he was afraid of an ambush. So he followed us from far away, about ten meters behind, so that if something happened he could still run away. There was another veteran who did not dare to sleep in a dormitory; he had to camp in the woods nearby, and he set up booby traps around him, in order to feel safe.

The war veteran who had killed five children was able to tell the story to us, after making a lot of efforts. I told him this: "Okay, you have killed five children, and you feel sorry for it. But I want you to know that children continue to die every day, today, and not only in the Third World, but also in America. Many children are being abused; many children die for different reasons. There are children who die just because they need one dose of medicine that they cannot afford. Do you know that if you want to, you could save five or ten children every day? Why do you get caught in that complex of guilt, and destroy your life? You are still young, and you can do something. It is good to see that you have done something wrong, and to regret it. But that is not enough, because there are practical things you can do to help children. If you want, we will tell you what to do in order to save five children today, and five children tomorrow. If you practice like that for a few months, you will see the five children who died in Vietnam smiling in you, and you will get transformation and healing.

So, to make a commitment not to do it anymore, and to make a commitment to do the opposite, will bring you a lot of energy. From the very moment that you kneel down and receive the Five Mindfulness Trainings, you become a bodhisattva, you become a great being. You may be filled with energy, because you are going out there as a bodhisattva, using your life to bring relief to many people who really need you, instead of allowing yourself to be trapped in that prison of guilt. In your daily life, you can free yourself and become someone full of energy, full of compassion.

Whatever the nature of your suffering, whatever the mistakes you have made, whatever categories they belong to, you can practice the same way. You make a commitment not to do it anymore, and you make a commitment to do the opposite, transforming yourself into an instrument of love and understanding. In the moment when you kneel down and receive the Five Mindfulness Trainings, you can be another person. Transformation can take place right from the very beginning. Many people, at the moment they receive Mindfulness Trainings, feel wonderful, as though they are new beings, because of that energy we call the vow, the determination to live our lives in such a way as to bring relief to many people who suffer.

(Three Bells)

(End of Dharma talk)

Dear Friends,